



Create an Inclusive Syllabus

The syllabus can be used as a powerful tool for creating an inclusive learning community and helping students succeed in your course (Tufts University, n.d.). Your syllabus also conveys your priorities as an instructor, sets the tone and your expectations for students' participation in the course, and communicates how you view your students as learners (Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

Use Student-Friendly Language and Visuals

In a 2010 study (Saville et al.), students who received a learner-centered syllabus perceived the instructor to be more approachable, caring, and enthusiastic (Richmond, 2016). A student-friendly syllabus can also help to establish better rapport between students and teachers and increase student motivation and achievement (Richmond, 2016).

To create a more inclusive syllabus, consider designing it as a document that is easy to read and reference—more like a guidebook than a rule book. This may be accomplished by:

- Defining words and concepts that students may not be familiar with or may learn during the course.
- Use welcoming and inviting language.

Once you have created your syllabus, review it from the viewpoint of your students. Overall, does it convey the characteristics of your course? If you want students to feel welcome, the document designed for them to understand the course and resources available needs to meet that goal. Sharing a long list of “thou shall nots” may be tempting but remember this communicates to your students that you expect them to engage in bad behavior. If a section would sound, from a student’s perspective, like scolding, consider rewriting it.

Instructor Information. Using the syllabus to make yourself and the course more approachable may help to ease student fears. Consider including a picture or avatar of yourself along with other relevant icons or emojis. Be sure to include the information below:

- Your name and what you would like students to call you. Consider adding your pronouns.
- Physical office location or information for meeting with students virtually
- Student hours: Consider using "Student Hours" instead of "Office Hours" to promote that these times are explicitly set aside for students in case they need help outside class.
- Telephone number or the best way to communicate with you
- Share the days of the week and times when students can expect to hear from you or when you will typically be off-line. For example, if they should not expect a response to an email or text after 7:00 p.m., let them know.
- Email address and other contact information

Include Diversity and Accessibility Statements

It is important to explicitly include diversity and accessibility statements. Each of these statements communicates your commitment to diversity and inclusion.



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Diversity Statement. A diversity statement is a paragraph or section that welcomes the range of human representations including race, class, gender, religion, accessibility, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). Including a diversity statement in your syllabus communicates your commitment to diversity and inclusion, sets the tone for your course and for respectful discourse within the course, and encourages student feedback as well as the sharing of diverse opinions or perspectives (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

A diversity statement typically consists of three elements (Eberly Center, n.d.):

- How your curriculum represents a diverse society.
- How your instruction advances diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- How the type of climate you hope to create in your classes supports a diverse and equitable culture.

Essentially, a diversity statement is expressing that you value the unique perspectives and experiences of all your students and that you believe all perspectives should be considered (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, n.d.). First check with your department head to see if there is a standard diversity statement that you are expected to use. If not, review the samples below to craft your diversity statement.

Accessibility Statement. An accessibility statement helps to signal to all students that you support equitable learning and welcome discussion about individual differences in learning, encountered barriers, and ways to maximize success. Consider using the term and approach of “accessibility” rather than “accommodations” as it recognizes that there are different ways of accessing materials rather than othering students who may benefit from such resources. This approach communicates that you value diversity and inclusion and normalizes the accommodation process (Bates College, n.d.).

In the past, accessibility statements have been used to inform students about the process for requesting accommodations and are focused on the institution’s legal obligations. These statements tend to single out students with disabilities and use language that focuses on limitations as opposed to barriers. Inclusive accessibility statements recognize disability as an aspect of diversity and equity, place emphasis on inclusive course design, and empower the student and faculty member to work together to ensure an effective learning experience (Bates College, n.d.).

Make Your Syllabus Accessible

Accessible Design. In creating an inclusive syllabus, you should remember to design the syllabus with accessibility in mind. Consider creating and distributing the syllabus through an online document platform such as Google Drive or through the LMS. A live document can be viewed from various devices for students who have accessibility settings on. Additionally, consider using the following to increase accessibility (University of Washington, n.d.):

- Headings
- Lists
- Helpful hyperlinks
- Images to support text



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Use Visuals. Using images and visuals on your syllabus can help engage students while introducing them to your interests and personality. Consider using emojis, a picture of yourself, images of the authors and experts in the curriculum, and logos or icons that show your support for students' identities and organizations. When using visuals, make sure to keep accessibility in mind. Add "alt text," or alternative text, to images that convey simple information or require only a short description. Alt text is text that is generally invisible to people viewing the image, and visible to people using assistive technology who cannot see the image. The description should be concise and convey the content of the image as well as its purpose in context. Word-processing applications and online rich text editors such as Microsoft Word, Google Docs, and Canvas include options for adding alt text on images (University of Washington, n.d.).

Sources

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